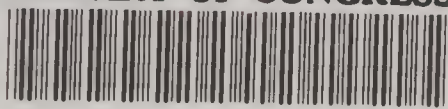


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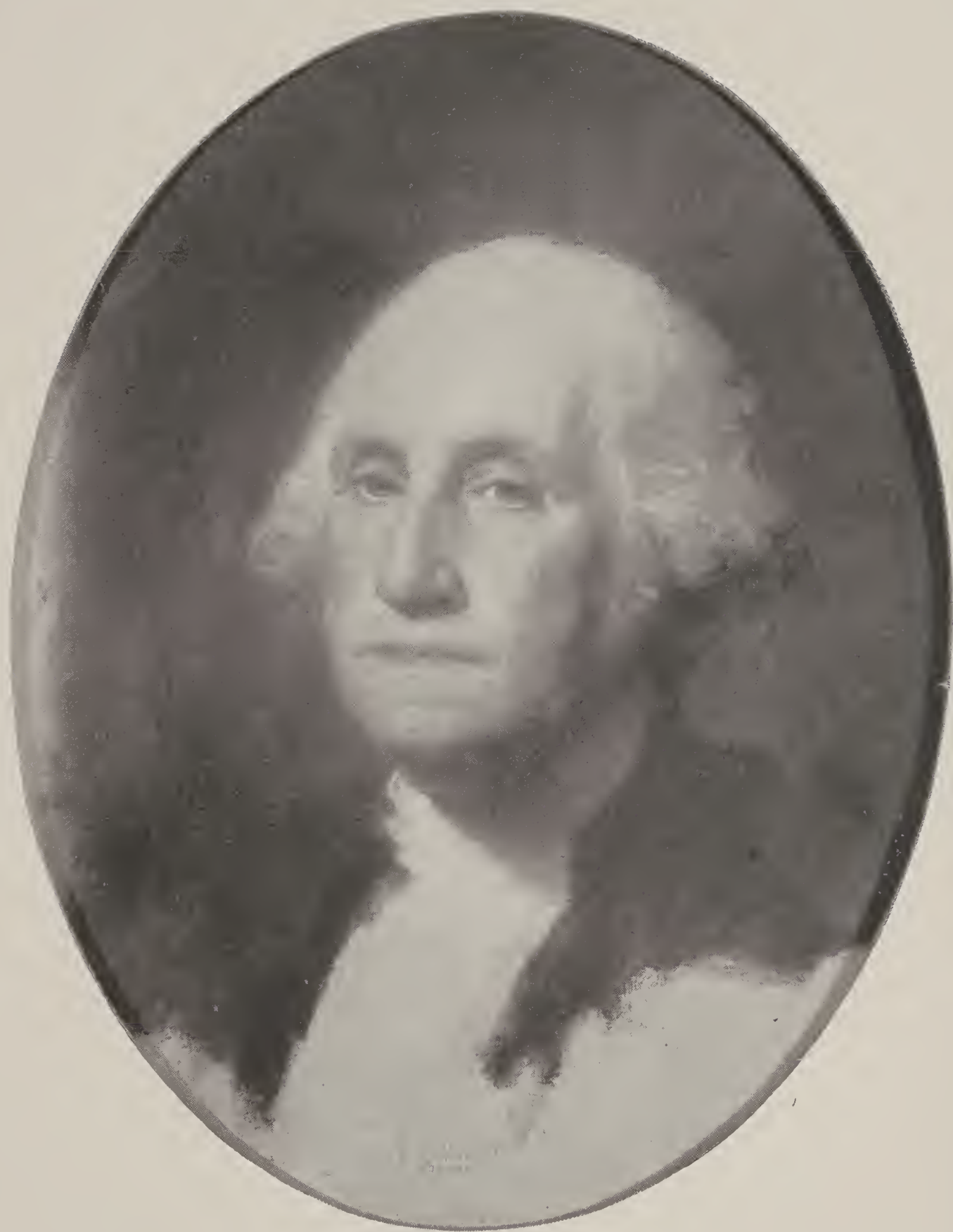
# George Washington as the Interpreter of His Time



HONORABLE DAVID J. HILL

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STUART'S HEAD OF WASHINGTON.



GEORGE WASHINGTON AS THE INTER-  
PRETER OF HIS TIME.

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## GEORGE WASHINGTON AS THE INTERPRETER OF HIS TIME.\*

*Members of the Patriotic Societies and Honored Friends:* When the caravels of Columbus turned their eager prows westward to face the night of an unknown sea, the last rays of a declining sun had fallen upon the broken and scattered columns of the middle ages; but when his ships rested, the dawn of a new day for humanity burst upon the solitude of another continent. Behind him lay the fragments of mediaeval empire, the spoil of a new race of kings. Before him stretched an untrodden wilderness, destined to become the home of a new civilization, the scene of the larger life and higher discipline of a new era in the history of mankind. The jewels which the faith of a generous queen had cast into the sea were restored to her hand set in the keys of empire, and henceforth the hopes of humanity sought the land of promise by the pathway of the western seas.

The quest for gold and the search for an El Dorado were the first dreams that filled the vision of a generation which had not learned that the true secret of wealth and happiness lies in the bosom of man himself. At first, adventurers came to claim possession by despoiling nature and the rule of subject races; but at last, a band of exiles, urged on by nobler aspirations, pushed forward through storm and darkness in search of freedom beyond the sea. Not for the conquistador or the buccaneer, but for the pilgrim and the planter was the new world predestined; and the lasting conquest of the continent was reserved for those who carried within them the true secret of mastery—the native strength of mind and purpose to make it theirs by honest toil and sacrifice. They came with their Bibles, their families and their flint locks—a trinity

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\*Address of Hon. David J. Hill, LL. D., delivered before the patriotic societies of Washington, on the hundredth anniversary of the death of George Washington, December 14, 1899.



of safeguards to the pioneer. The first taught him high standards of duty, the second filled him with incentives to frugality and virtue, and the third offered protection against the wild beast and the lurking savage. The highest type of man came into contact with the most stimulating influences of nature, and there followed the development of a firm, resourceful and indomitable manhood, fitted to create a new epoch in the history of the world.

Superiority in the realm of thought offers endless resources, and the American colonists possessed the self-directing power which habitual thoughtfulness bestows. In the name of their king they organized civil governments in which every citizen became a participant, and multitudes rose to the level of high statesmanship by the long habit of justice and liberty. A hundred and fifty years of political experience rendered the colonies the best educated communities in public affairs that had ever existed, and when the War for Independence began, self-government was no experiment, but the inheritance of five generations of Americans who had made and honored their own laws in the spirit of obedience to their profoundest convictions of duty.

The Revolution was, therefore, no immature fruit of political philosophy, no sudden plunge into the uncertainties of an untried freedom, no scheme of ambitious leaders to secure personal advantages, but the deliberate and reluctant determination of the people to be rid of a relation of dependence that brought them no protection and much humiliation. The colonies were ripe for independence, capable of assuming those responsibilities to the family of nations which independence implies, and of maintaining that condition of public peace and private justice without which no government has the right to exist. Throughout twelve years of public debate, which preceded the final act of separation, it was the conviction of great jurists on both sides of the Atlantic that resistance to the encroachments of the Crown and the Parliament was justified by all the traditions of English liberty.

When the battle of Lexington gave the signal of revolt, Congress, no longer hesitating, sought a commander-in-chief of its scattered forces and unanimously selected Colonel

Washington. The choice inspired the whole seaboard with confidence and a general thrill of hope swept away all doubt. "If you speak of solid information and sound judgment," said Patrick Henry, "Colonel Washington is unquestionably the greatest man upon the floor." Rising in his place, the chosen leader modestly thanked Congress for the honor, declining the offer of compensation, and added, in words which deserve to be written in the heart of every holder of public office: "I will keep an exact account of my expenses; those, I doubt not, will be discharged, and that is all I desire."

As the commander-in-chief hastened northward to unite the resistance of the whole country by taking command of a New England army, the shout of "God save the King" died away forever in the hearts of the patriots, and the garnered liberties of a hundred years burst into the impassioned cry of "God save the People!" From the moment when one of their own number, distinguished from his fellow-citizens only by the preëminence in which he shared their qualities, marshalled the scattered bands of militia into an effective army and held them in rigid subordination to the civil authority, the sovereignty of the people became an established fact.

It is in his representative capacity, his interpretation of his opportunity, and his part in the national development that Washington belongs to his country, to the world, and to all time. We think of him as the first of American patriots, but his greatness lies in his relations of leadership rather than in a lonely isolation; for indissolubly connected with him are the minute men who answered to his call under the ancient elm at Cambridge, the tattered heroes who with him hewed their way across the ice-blocked Delaware, and the weary, unpaid troops who bade him farewell at Newburg, when the war was ended and the hard tasks of peace lay before his impoverished army. In celebrating him, we cannot forget the unfaltering fortitude and bravery of those who suffered at Valley Forge and bled in the great struggle for the Hudson.

When we consider the condition of the colonies, their meagre resources, and the imperfect discipline of the army, so poor in munitions of war that Franklin seriously proposed the use of bows and arrows, we are filled with amazement at

Washington's splendid genius for construction and organization. But beyond our wonder at his matchless skill in marshalling his unequal forces, rises the admiration of his sublime patriotism when, in the moment of triumph, turning from the vision of empire, he placed the crown of the victorious colonies, offered to himself, upon the brow of a sovereign people, and modestly termed his final success "a signal stroke of Providence." And yet the exaltation of Washington's character is not the explanation of the Revolution. Behind him and within him were unseen forces pushing on to their fulfillment and linking his agency with the great principle of progress as the instrument of the power which in all ages is working out the destinies of man.

The new world was to bear its ripened fruit of a new polity. The scattered seed of freedom and self-rule was to be garnered in a harvest of mighty States. The War for Independence, with all its glories of hardships and victory, was but a little thing upon the great scale of political development. From Paul Revere's midnight ride, when the flashing lights in the old church tower kindled the fires of revolution, to the close of the heroic struggle, when the town crier's call, "Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown and all's well," rang out upon the night; the seven years of battle and suspense, the seven fateful years which told the story of American fortitude at Bunker Hill, at Ticonderoga, at Saratoga and at King's Mountain,—all this was but the severing of an ancient bond, the birth-pang of nativity. But the time of trial came in those critical years of the young republic, after peace was concluded and the sword was sheathed, when all Europe scornfully smiled at the misfortunes of the liberated colonies, now free to consummate their folly, with a worthless currency, a ruined credit, a condition of unrest and rivalry between the States, and a confederation without power to enforce the laws of Congress.

Then it was that Washington, who had disbanded his army and retired to his estates at Mount Vernon, wrote to Jay: "We cannot exist long as a Nation without having lodged somewhere a power which will pervade the whole Union in as energetic a manner as the authority of the State governments extends over the States." All that was provincial in his sym-



pathies had been cast aside when he drew his sword at Charlestown. A devoted Virginian, he was yet the first to see that the only hope for republican institutions lay in a strong and consolidated union, binding the divergent interests of local communities with a single and inseparable bond of nationality.

Called by the love and confidence of the people to be the chief magistrate and guardian of the Constitution, he was confronted with a group of States timidly and reluctantly united, and suspicious of all central authority. At a time when Hamilton was stoned, Jay burned in effigy, and apostles of sedition were in arms against the government, nothing but the prudence of Washington could have accomplished the colossal task of national organization. It has been said that Abraham Lincoln was "the first American to reach the lonely heights of immortal fame." Shall we not rather say, that when he ascended to his place in history his highest honor was to enter into fellowship with the founder of that Union whose completion he accomplished? Without the one, the rising walls would have crumbled and fallen; without the other they would have remained uncrowned by the splendid dome of nationality.

It was not the needs of the moment only which filled the clear vision of Washington. Far away westward, beyond the Great Lakes, to the Mississippi, stretched the vast Northwest Territory, and beyond it an unknown land extended to the ocean. Here uncounted millions were about to follow the paths of the great waterways to create new homes in the wilderness. What was to be their destiny? Was it to become the scene of jarring and petty sovereignties, or should the protection of the Constitution extend its blessings over this vast area? Inspired by this hope, Washington had journeyed into this western country and, returning, resolved to bind it inseparably to the Union. The projects undertaken, the long story of settlement and development by which this region became the seat of rich and populous States may well furnish a subject of reflection at this moment, when the movements of that earlier time are tested by the fruitful issues of a hundred years. How vast, how impossible of utilization, seemed

those boundless reaches of forest and mountain and prairie! How helpless was man before the stupendous magnitudes of that continental solitude, now teeming with a happy population and held in the grasp of a system of transportation that makes the distance from ocean to ocean like a journey between the borders of a single State!

By instinct a nation-builder, Washington perceived that without diversified industries, America would always continue in a relation of dependence upon Europe. In his first Address to Congress he advocated the fostering of industrial enterprise, and wrote elsewhere: "The promotion of domestic manufactures will, in my conception, be among the first consequences which may be naturally expected from an energetic government." He clearly grasped the great principle that, while there is a natural limit to the capacity of mankind to consume the fruits of the earth, there is no limit to the use of mechanical productions. Together with Hamilton, he founded a policy which has enabled the country to absorb an immense population, and filled it with the music of happy industry. It is this development, augmented by the substitution of mechanical power for muscular energy, which has built our four hundred and fifty cities, where only six or eight thousand inhabitants than existed, and created the expanding forces which push our commerce into distant oceans, clamoring for admission to the markets of the world. "It is not in the power of the proudest and most polite people on earth," wrote Washington, at a time when the revolutionary statesmen wore homespun made of their own wool, in their own homes, by their own wives and daughters, "to prevent us from becoming a great, a respectable, and a commercial nation, if we shall continue united and faithful to ourselves."

And now that we have become a commercial nation, with no limit to our production except the demand for our commodities, would the great statesman counsel indifference to our future growth? And how shall we continue to be "faithful to ourselves?" Surely not by suffering the door of trade, opened by negotiation and secured by solemn treaties, to be closed against us; nor by alienating territory that has come under the benign sovereignty of the United States by the law

of nations; and still less by permitting anarchy or despotism to disturb the peace and prosperity of communities brought under our protection.

A course of events which no human mind could have foreseen has forced upon the American people a weight of responsibility such as they have not borne since the proclamation of Lincoln threw upon them the recognition of an emancipated race. Twelve millions of human beings, swept into the sheltering embrace of this great Nation, demand in their inexperience and helplessness what our institutions can do for them. It is a tragic moment in the history of this people, a moment whose issues demand a supreme elevation of thought and a masterful effort of unselfish action. We have said by the imperative voice of our army and navy that these wards of the Nation shall no longer suffer the domination of a corrupt colonial system, nor be left to the mercy of crude and self-constituted despots who would profit by their political immaturity.

But soon will begin a task which armies and navies cannot accomplish, the task of enabling these liberated millions to understand and enjoy the blessings of liberty and order. At such a moment the American people may well draw inspiration from the calm, disinterested and magnanimous patriotism of Washington. Having broken oppression and scattered anarchy, American heroism is now called upon to solve the problems of the greatest trust ever confided to a generous people. Shall the hand which has wrought the liberating work of war hesitate to bestow the lofty policies of peace? In the presence of new emergencies, we instinctively look to the past for counsel. Let us thank God that in so doing we can turn to a fountain of high wisdom and pure patriotism in George Washington; and catching his spirit, casting aside all selfish and partisan prejudice, rising to the splendid height of his self-forgetfulness, looking only to the interests of this great nation and those whom it has gathered under its protection, we shall see with a clearer vision and act with a more resolute will.

Around the tomb at Mount Vernon the rude winds of December have scattered the leaves of a hundred dead summers,



but the silent, flowing river has never ceased to seek the sea. Let us learn the lesson which the genius of the place inspires, that nations, like men, become great, not by the goals they rest in, but by the transitions which must mark their growth.



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